



## King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1093/fs/kny175](https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/kny175)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Bielecki, E. (2018). On Fathers and Feuilletonistes: Creativity and Paternity in Balzac's *La Muse du département*. *French Studies*, 72(4), 521-538. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/kny175>

### Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

ON FATHERS AND FEUILLETONISTES: CREATIVITY AND PATERNITY IN  
BALZAC'S *LA MUSE DU DÉPARTEMENT*.

*Abstract*

The iconography of Balzac often presents him as paradigmatic of a model of phallic creativity, his theory and practice of the novel seen as exemplifying the patriarchal idea of the author as father. This article demonstrates that this view of Balzac needs to be revised through an examination of his 1843 novel, *La Muse du département*, which combines a story of adultery with a jaundiced depiction of literary labour and creative exhaustion, exploring what becomes of the idea of the author as father in a society with a weakened paternal order. Through examining the metaphoric link the novel establishes between the narrative of adultery and the representation of literary creation, the article develops a metapoetic reading of the relationship between biological and literary paternity, analysing how the formal characteristics of the novel refract anxieties about the erosion of paternal authority in July Monarchy France.

Of all the works in the Musée Rodin in Paris that solicit a visitor's attention, not the least insistent in their claims are two of the preparatory studies the sculptor produced for his *Monument à Balzac*, commissioned in 1891 by the *Société des gens de lettres* to honour one of its early presidents.<sup>1</sup> The first, produced in 1894 and known as the *Étude de Nu C*, shows a naked Balzac with his arms crossed over his chest above an enormous belly, one foot purposefully placed in front of the other. A striking feature

---

<sup>1</sup> On the unhappy history of the monument see Albert Elsen, *Rodin and Balzac* (Beverly Hills: Cantor, Fitzgerald and Co, 1973).

of the statue is the presence of the mound between Balzac's legs from which the clay was quarried,<sup>2</sup> and into which his penis merges, emphasizing his virility and suggesting a demiurgic power. The second study, the *Étude de nu F, dite en athlète*, dates from 1896. Headless, it is the naked body of a Balzac in rather better physical condition. This time, his arms are crossed in front of his lower abdomen, and he is grasping his penis in his left hand. It is this body that, draped in a monk's robe and with the addition of a head, forms the final monument, which since 1939 has loomed over pedestrians at the Raspail/Montparnasse intersection. Although Balzac's penis is no longer on display, the final monument retains a phallic dimension through its powerful verticality.<sup>3</sup>

These two studies seem to provide a fairly unequivocal answer to the question Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar ask at the beginning of *The Madwoman in the Attic*: 'Is a pen a metaphorical penis?'<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Balzac, who himself had written in 1830 that 'aujourd'hui, un homme qui ne fait pas un livre est un impuissant',<sup>5</sup> has often been seen as exemplifying a model of phallic creativity. Such a model is irresistibly suggested by the gold and turquoise cane, 'tenant à la fois du sceptre et du phallus',<sup>6</sup> which he often carried and which became central to his iconography in the nineteenth century. Delphine de Girardin, in her whimsical 1836 novella, *La Canne de Monsieur de Balzac*, imagined that 'cette canne, cette énorme canne, cette

---

<sup>2</sup> On the function of this mound, see Elsen, pp. 48-49.

<sup>3</sup> See Naomi Schor, 'Pensive Texts and Thinking Statues: Balzac with Rodin', *Critical Inquiry*, 2.2 (2001), 239-265 (p. 243) and David J. Getsy, *Rodin: Sex and the Making of Modern Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 18-23.

<sup>4</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Balzac, 'De la mode en littérature', in *Œuvres diverses*, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1990, 1996), II, 755-762 (p. 758).

<sup>6</sup> Lucien Dällenbach, *La Canne de Balzac* (Paris: José Corti, 1996), p. 10.

monstrueuse canne’<sup>7</sup> was the secret of his genius: conferring on Balzac the power of invisibility, it enabled him to observe private conversations and eavesdrop on secret conferences. Girardin thus associated the cane with what Henry James, who considered Balzac ‘the father of us all’,<sup>8</sup> calls precisely Balzac’s ‘penetrating power’.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in his 1902 essay on Balzac, James repeatedly links creative and sexual energy, as for example when, discussing the pre-eminence of female characters in the *Comédie humaine*, he writes that ‘it is as surrounded by them even as some magnificent indulgent pasha by his overflowing seraglio that Balzac sits most at his ease’,<sup>10</sup> conjoining the ideas of royal authority and phallic power. It is this image of Balzac as lusty, virile figure, distinguished, in James’s words, by the ‘swagger [...] of a “bounder” of genius and of feeling’,<sup>11</sup> that explains Alvy Starr’s post-coital joke in *Annie Hall*: ‘As Balzac said: “There goes another novel.”’ Substitute Dickens for Balzac and the joke falls flat. That Balzac, Rodin, James and Woody Allen, should link together virility and creative power is unsurprising: as Gilbert and Gubar point out, ‘the patriarchal notion that the writer fathers his text just as God fathered the world is and has been all-pervasive in Western literary civilization’.<sup>12</sup> This link between fatherhood and authorship has come to be embedded in the French language. Standard dictionaries of French today include in the headword ‘paternité’, in addition to the primary meaning of ‘état, qualité de père’, a second definition, ‘qualité d’auteur, de créateur’. This meaning is attested in Larousse’s *Grand Dictionnaire*

---

<sup>7</sup> Delphine de Girardin, *La Canne de Monsieur de Balzac* (Paris: Dumont, 1836), p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> Henry James, ‘The Lesson of Balzac’, in *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Editions*, ed. by Leon Edel (New York: Library of America, 1984), 115-139 (p. 120).

<sup>9</sup> Henry James, ‘Honoré de Balzac 1902’, in *Notes on Novelists* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1914), 86-112 (p. 112).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, p. 4.

*universel du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, published in 1874, but not before that, which suggests that its inclusion was linked to the crystallization in jurisprudence over the course of the nineteenth century of the author's *droit moral*, one important plank of which is the *droit de paternité*. First recognized in 1837, this confers on an author the absolute right either to claim or to conceal his authorship of a work.<sup>13</sup>

Balzac, as a zealous crusader for the reform of French literary property law, played a role in this jurisprudential crystallization. His arguments in favour of authors' rights mobilized the idea of author as father for specific strategic purposes. In his 1834 'Lettre aux écrivains français du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle', a call to arms that would ultimately result in the formation of the *Société des gens de lettres* in 1838, Balzac denounced the lack of legal protection afforded to authors, labouring under the threefold threat of counterfeiting, lending libraries, and adulterous (the metaphor is Balzac's) theatrical adaptations.<sup>14</sup> He excoriates the legal regime governing intellectual property established under the Revolution as a 'loi barbare [qui] a déclaré vos œuvres propriétés publiques, comme si elle eût prévu que la littérature et les arts allaient émigrer', thus presenting it as part and parcel of a broader Revolutionary attack on established rights.<sup>15</sup> He repeated this line of argument in the report he submitted, in his capacity as president of the *Société des gens de lettres*, to the *commission de loi* established under the chairmanship of Lamartine in 1841 to investigate the question of literary property rights.<sup>16</sup> There Balzac claims that 'avant

---

<sup>13</sup> See Gavin Gérard, *Le Droit moral de l'auteur dans la jurisprudence et la législation françaises* (Paris: Dalloz, 1960), pp. 50-52.

<sup>14</sup> Balzac, 'Lettre aux écrivains français du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle', in *Œuvres diverses*, II, 1235-1253 (p. 1243). On Balzac's efforts to establish greater legal protection for authors see Sotirios Paraschas, *The Realist Author and the Sympathetic Imagination* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), pp. 92-102.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1236.

<sup>16</sup> Lamartine's commission resisted the lobbying of publishers and authors to declare literary property rights perpetual, limiting them to a period of thirty years after the

1789, la propriété littéraire était héréditaire dans les familles comme toute autre propriété'.<sup>17</sup> Citing as evidence a trio of laws from 1571, 1732, and 1777, he asserts that in repealing these laws, 'égarée par ces mots *privilèges et grâce*, émanant du souverain, [La constituante] supprima ces trois arcs-boutant de la propriété littéraire'.<sup>18</sup> Here the Revolutionary reforms to intellectual property are linked not only to Republicanism, but also, through the image of the flying buttresses, to dechristianization. The attack on the author is an attack on the holy trinity of patriarchal authority: father, King, God. Balzac's argument, in its understanding of legal history, is certainly unorthodox. The Revolutionary law against which he fulminates - that of 19-24 July 1793, sponsored by Joseph Lakanal - is more normally described by scholars of French literary property law as the foundation stone of the modern regime, in so far as for the first time it recognized that the author had a property right in his work.<sup>19</sup> Lakanal's law did, however, in recognition of the public interest, limit the enjoyment of that property right to a specific period of time: the lifetime of the writer and the first five years following his death. Balzac alludes to this aspect of the law in his 'Lettre aux écrivains français' when he refers to it as having declared literary works public property, and thus presents it as having effected a form

---

death of the author. It is nonetheless striking that Lamartine begins his report with some orotund periods on the role of private property in strengthening the family, not necessarily an obvious starting point for a discussion of how to ensure authors can make a reasonable living. See Alphonse de Lamartine, *De la propriété littéraire: rapport fait à la Chambre des députés* (Paris: Gosselin, 1841).

<sup>17</sup> Balzac, 'Notes remises à MM. les députés composant la commission de la loi sur la propriété littéraire', in Balzac, *Œuvres complètes de H. de Balzac*, 23 vols (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1870-1879) XXII (1872), 299-325 (pp. 300-301).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Pierre-Yves Gautier's primer, *Propriété littéraire et artistique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), pp. 13-37. On the controversies surrounding the idea — not at all self-evident — that a literary work can be considered a property, see Laurent Pfister, 'La Propriété littéraire est-elle une propriété? Controverses sur la nature du droit d'auteur au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis*, 72.1-2 (2004), 103-125.

of expropriation, or more specifically disinheritance. Under the Revolutionary regime, all writers ‘sont déclarés inhabiles à se succéder à eux-mêmes’.<sup>20</sup>

If there is something awkward about Balzac’s formulation here, which presents the idea of writers being incompetent to ‘se succéder à eux-mêmes’ as a moral scandal, when being able to do so would surely be a logical one, introducing the idea of disinheritance nonetheless enables Balzac to move his argument on to tried and tested, solid argumentative ground. In the eighteenth century public opinion had been moved by the plight of Corneille’s great niece, reduced to living in penury (she was subsequently adopted by Voltaire),<sup>21</sup> and Balzac reminds his readers of that case when he writes that in the nineteenth century the French public:

voit sans honte les descendants de Corneille, tous pauvres, autour de  
la statue de Corneille, qui a inféodé des richesses dans toutes les  
granges, qui enfante des récoltes qu’aucune intempérie ne menace,  
qui d’âge en âge, enrichira des comédiens, des libraires, des  
papetiers, des relieurs et des commentateurs.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to invoking the figures of the immiserated widow and orphan to wring sympathy from his readers, Balzac also uses agricultural metaphors to describe intellectual work, thus assimilating intellectual property to real property. The great writer’s work is, he suggests, akin to a family estate; preventing its transmission from generation to generation is therefore presented as an anomaly, demanding regularization. For Balzac, it seems, the author is always a father, and it is as a father that he stakes a claim for having a transmissible property right in his work.

---

<sup>20</sup> Balzac, ‘Lettre’, p. 1236.

<sup>21</sup> For details of this see Lebrun’s *Ode et lettres à M. de Voltaire en faveur de la famille du grand Corneille* (Geneva: Duchesne, 1760).

<sup>22</sup> Balzac, ‘Lettre’, pp. 1236-7.

Balzac therefore seems to be paradigmatic of the patriarchal idea of the author as father, sib to the sovereign and god. This patriarchal idea certainly informs his depiction of female artists in the *Comédie humaine*, the most famous of whom is Camille Maupin, described in *Béatrix* as ‘cet être amphibie qui n’est ni homme ni femme’.<sup>23</sup> Balzac’s commitment to the idea that illustrious women are necessarily hermaphrodites is widely acknowledged by critics;<sup>24</sup> less widely acknowledged is the fact that he also figures the male artist as an ‘être amphibie’.<sup>25</sup> Thus in his 1830 essay ‘Des Artistes’ he begins very much as the swaggering bounder James described, trumpeting the power of the artist: ‘Un homme qui dispose de la pensée, est un souverain’.<sup>26</sup> But he goes on to suggest that the artist is also the ‘humble instrument d’une volonté despotique’.<sup>27</sup> Balzac draws here on the commonplace idea of inspiration as possession, but he gives it a sexed and sexualized twist when he describes the precise moment inspiration strikes as ‘l’extase de la conception voilant les déchirantes douleurs de l’enfantement’.<sup>28</sup> Certainly this suggests a spermist conception of the work of art: it comes into being, preformed and perfect, in a moment of ecstasy figured as male orgasm. But at the same time, the work of art

---

<sup>23</sup> Balzac, *Béatrix*, in *La Comédie humaine*, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 12 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976-81), II (1976), 637-941 (p. 677).

<sup>24</sup> See Colette Cosnier, *Le Silence des filles: de l’aiguille à la plume* (Paris: Fayard, 2001), pp. 30-34 and Owen Heathcote, ‘“Cet être amphibie qui n’est ni homme ni femme”: Marginalizing Gender and Gendering the Marginal in Balzac’s Camille Maupin’, *Nottingham French Studies*, 41.2 (Autumn 2002), 37-46. On the hermaphroditism of Dinah in *La Muse du département* see Marie Baudry, ‘Le Romancier et le bas-bleu’, in *La Littérature en bas-bleu: Romancières sous la Restauration et la monarchie de Juillet (1815-1848)*, ed. by Andrea Del Lungo and Brigitte Louichon (Paris: Garnier, 2010), pp. 37-61.

<sup>25</sup> On the more general treatment of hermaphroditism in Balzac’s work (influenced of course by his interest in Swedenborg), see Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, ‘Balzac et l’androgynie. Personnages, symboles et métaphores androgynes dans la *Comédie humaine*’, *L’Année balzacienne* 1973, pp. 253-277.

<sup>26</sup> Balzac, ‘Des Artistes’, in Balzac, *Œuvres diverses*, II, 707-720 (p. 708).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 711.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 711.



gestates slowly and is brought forth in sorrow. The artist is as much mother as father. This suggests that the model of author-as-father, although it might have served a useful purpose in arguing for authors' rights, is in fact inadequate to explain Balzac's notion of literary creativity. Better to understand his conception of the relationship between authorship and paternity, let us turn to *La Muse du département*, part of the *Scènes de la vie de province*, a novel which constellates ideas of paternity, authorship, and illegitimacy in unexpected ways.

The genesis of *La Muse* does not seem to have involved any experience of the 'extase de la conception'; its coming into being was certainly, however, a painful labour. In March 1843 Balzac found himself with only a fortnight in which to produce a novel, but as he confessed to Mme Hanska, 'depuis deux mois la tête est fatiguée'.<sup>29</sup> Despite, or because of, the triple yoke of burnout, contractual obligation and spiralling debt, he did of course manage to produce something: cobbling together bits and pieces of text written, indeed published, previously (which account for about a quarter of *La Muse*),<sup>30</sup> and integrating these rags and orts into a new narrative structure, he confected a jaundiced novel in which a cynical depiction of Parisian literary life, refracting his own disenchantment, is combined with a story in which an impotent husband with dynastic ambitions manoeuvres his spouse into having an affair to secure himself heirs. It is precisely the intersection between these two different aspects of the novel, the narrative of adultery and illegitimacy and the depiction of literary labour, which is of interest here. *La Muse* is set in a world characterized by a weakened paternal order. What becomes of the author-as-father in such a world?

---

<sup>29</sup> Letter of 2 March 1843, in Balzac, *Lettres à Mme Hanska 1832-1844*, ed. by Roger Pierrot (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1990), pp. 646-652 (p. 648).

<sup>30</sup> For details of the pre-original texts incorporated into *La Muse* see the Pléiade edition of *La Comédie humaine*, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex, 12 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976-81), IV (1976), pp. 1356-1387.

Before we answer this question, since *La Muse* is not one of Balzac's better-known texts, a brief recapitulation of the plot is in order.<sup>31</sup>

The action of *La Muse* takes place in Sancerre and Paris between the early 1820s and 1844. The eponymous heroine is Dinah, a provincial bluestocking and would-be George Sand, who converts from Calvinism to Catholicism at the age of 17, 'uniquement par ambition'.<sup>32</sup> Dinah is unhappily married to a senescent miser, Polydore de La Baudraye. Polydore's great-grandfather, born the humble Monsieur Milaud, was a Calvinist who converted to Catholicism following the Edict of Fontainebleau, and as a result was given a title and lands confiscated from the original La Baudraye family, who refused to convert. Polydore fears that if he dies without an heir, his lands will revert to this original family. Polydore is, however, impotent, his marriage therefore unconsummated and his dynastic ambitions apparently destined to remain unfulfilled. The boredom of Dinah's married provincial life is palliated only by the composition of second-rate poetry, the founding of a local literary salon, and the collecting of antique furniture and a trio of suitors, among them the *procureur du roi*, M. de Clagny. A more substantial diversion is provided by the homecoming visit of two celebrities: the *feuilletoniste* Étienne Lousteau and the physician Horace

---

<sup>31</sup> Anne-Marie Meininger describes it in her introduction to the Pléiade edition as 'un des chefs-d'œuvres méconnus de *La Comédie humaine*'. Over 40 years later it remains relatively understudied, treated normally as something of an ancillary text. Nonetheless a number of important articles have appeared examining both its representation of family issues and of reading and writing practices. For recent treatments of the former see Marion Mas, *Le Père Balzac: Représentations de la paternité dans La Comédie humaine* (Paris: Garnier, 2015), pp. 219-29; on the latter see Lucien Dällenbach, 'Reading as Suture (Problems of Reception of the Fragmentary Text: Balzac and Claude Simon)', *Style*, 18.2 (Spring 1984), 186-206; Lawrence Schehr, 'Quoin of the Realm: *La Muse du département*', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 31.3 (Fall 1991), 78-87, and Michel Butor, '*Olympia ou les vengeances romaines*', *La Revue des Belles Lettres*, 1 (1992), 71-79.

<sup>32</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *La Muse du département*, in *La Comédie humaine*, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 12 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1976-81), IV (1976), 629-791 (p. 635).

Bianchon. Dinah falls in love with and pregnant by Lousteau and abandons her husband for him. Together Dinah and Lousteau eke out a precarious existence in Paris, with Dinah in effect acting as the main breadwinner, writing articles, even novels, for the indolent Lousteau. (One of the short stories she writes, 'Un Prince de la Bohème', is incorporated into the *Comédie humaine* itself.) The children are claimed by Polydore as his own, in accordance with article 312 of the Napoleonic Code. At the same time as he manages to acquire heirs, Polydore also manages to accrue a substantial fortune, largely through embezzling part of a succession that falls to Dinah upon the convenient death of an uncle in America.<sup>33</sup> Following closely upon the fortune comes a peerage. At this point, Polydore, 'une fois nommé comte, pair de France et commandeur de la légion d'honneur, eut la vanité de se faire bien représenter par une femme et une maison bien tenue'.<sup>34</sup> He thus seeks a reconciliation with Dinah which she accepts, thoroughly disenchanted at this point with Lousteau and literature.

In the characters of Dinah and Lousteau, the novel bodies forth two writers. Neither of them is successful, but they are unsuccessful in different ways, and each embodies a different understanding of authorship and creativity. Let us first consider Lousteau, whom Balzac's readers had already encountered, notably in *Illusions perdues*, where he acts as Lucien's psychopomp in the murky underworld of Parisian journalism. In that novel Lousteau was already a figure of disillusion who had abandoned artistic pretensions in favour of hack work. The same is true of the

---

<sup>33</sup> For detailed analysis of the financial dealings in the novel see Patrick Berthier, 'La dot de Dinah', *Romantisme*, 13 (1983), 119-128.

<sup>34</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 778.

Lousteau of *La Muse*.<sup>35</sup> He belongs to ‘ce groupe d’écrivains appelés du nom de *faiseurs* [...]’. Lorsqu’il ne peut plus ou qu’il ne veut plus rien être un écrivain se fait *faiseur*’.<sup>36</sup> Being a writer in a serious sense is here presented as a matter of being rather doing, which implies a Romantic aesthetic in which what is most valuable about art is that it is the emanation of a unique subjectivity. Although by the time of *La Muse* Lousteau can no longer lay claim to being a serious writer, he continues to perform that idea of authorship. This is apparent in the lines that first introduce (or re-introduce) him to the reader:

En 1836, Lousteau, fatigué par seize années de luttes à Paris [...] paraissait avoir quarante-huit ans, quoiqu’il n’eût que trente-sept. Déjà chauve, il avait pris un air byronien en harmonie avec ses ruines anticipées [...]. Il crut nécessaire d’outrer dans sa patrie et son faux dédain de la vie et sa misanthropie postiche. Néanmoins, parfois ses yeux jetaient encore des flammes comme ces volcans qu’on croit éteints; et il essaya de remplacer par l’élégance de la mise tout ce qui pouvait lui manquer de jeunesse aux yeux d’une femme.<sup>37</sup>

The keynotes of this description of Lousteau are speciousness and superannuation. He is a gimcrack Gallic Byron, a throwback to the high Romantic period, whose shtick might impress provincials, but only provincials. The use of the volcano simile is a further Byronic flourish, suggestive of an idea of the artist’s creative power as an irresistible, explosive, ejaculatory force. But the brief flash of creative energy

---

<sup>35</sup> On the representation of journalism in the novel, consistently placed in opposition to meaningful artistic activity, see Allan H. Pasco, *Balzac, Literary Sociologist* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 151-170.

<sup>36</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 733.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 667.

glimpsed by the reader is itself revealed by the next clause to be illusory — if Lousteau is still able to suggest a volcanic power, it is deployed solely in the interests of his Don Juanism. Sexual potency survives, just about, although artistic potency has dwindled.

In fact, Lousteau is clearly, as a creative force, extinct. Over the course of the novel, he produces one piece of original copy, namely the notice he has printed when his and Dinah's first child is born:

*Madame la baronne de La Baudraye est heureusement acouchée  
d'un garçon.*

*Monsieur Étienne Lousteau a le plaisir de vous en faire part.*

*La mère et l'enfant se portent bien.*<sup>38</sup>

This is the only text Lousteau authors in the novel, and it yokes together biological and literary paternity. Indeed it functions solely as a claim of paternity, in its dual sense — in exercising his *droit de paternité* to identify himself as the author of the notice, Lousteau also identifies himself as the father of Dinah's child. But the *billet de faire-part* is identificatory in another sense. As the journalist Nathan explains to M. de Clagny who, always Dinah's loyal servant, spends days dashing around Paris tracking down and destroying every copy, the document lays bare its author's character: 'Cet autographe est une de ces armes dont ne doit pas se priver un athlète dans le cirque. Ce billet prouve que Lousteau manque de cœur, de bon goût, de dignité'.<sup>39</sup> Nathan's use of the word 'autographe' here is significant, for of course the *billet de faire-part* is not strictly speaking an autograph, but a printed document. His use of the term recalls to the reader's mind an episode earlier in the novel, during Lousteau and Bianchon's

---

<sup>38</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 762. In fact, even this is not a piece of original copy; it is based on a *billet de faire-part* that Jules Janin wrote in similar circumstances.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 763.

stay at La Baudraye, when Dinah asks Lousteau to contribute to her autograph album. He produces a poem entitled 'Spleen', which, in keeping with his Byronic self-representation, is written in a vein of saturnine romanticism in which the lonely lyric subject bewails his inability to write suitable occasional verse:

Cet album, feuilleté par les doigts d'une femme,

Ne doit pas s'assombrir au reflet de mon âme.<sup>40</sup>

The poem covers familiar territory in wresting a poem from the lyric subject's self-confessed sense of artistic impotence, chiselling it out of his writer's block and thus affirming his artistic power to create ex nihilo. The text purports to be an act of self-disclosure, in which the poet lays bare his soul. It is, of course, no such thing, but rather a rhetorical performance, and not a very good one. But Dinah is impressed by the verses, and specifically impressed by the speed with which she believes Lousteau to have composed them. In fact, far from having written them over the course of a single day, Lousteau 'gardait ces vers dans sa mémoire depuis au moins dix ans, car ils lui furent inspirés sous la Restauration par la difficulté de parvenir'.<sup>41</sup> In his contribution to Dinah's album, Lousteau performs a certain kind of poetic identity, underpinned by an idea of poetry as the spontaneous efflux of the soul, an act of originary genius. But his supposedly sincere *cri de cœur* is feigned. On the contrary, the *billet de faire-part* is an authentic, albeit inadvertent, act of self-disclosure. Lousteau's assertion of his procreative power, expressed through the authoring of the *billet*, rebounds against him. Together the two 'autographes' Lousteau produces in the novel provide an ironic gloss on the Romantic idea of the author as creator, fathering an original text which bears the stamp of his own personality. *La Muse* gestures

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 678.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 679.

towards this idea of the author, but within the diegesis it exists only in a degraded form, burlesqued by Lousteau.

If the Romantic idea of the author as a figure who knows ‘l’extase de la conception’ is presented in *La Muse* as a busted flush, what of the depiction of ‘les déchirantes douleurs de l’enfantement’? This exhausting labour falls, appropriately, on the eponymous female protagonist. Like Lousteau, Dinah is presented in the novel as a sham writer. When she is first introduced the narrator tells us that she belongs to that class of women, afflicted by the ‘lèpre sentimentale’ of *Sandisme*, ‘qui, sans leurs prétensions au génie, eussent été charmantes’.<sup>42</sup> This mocking dismissal of women’s intellectual and creative ambitions informs the trajectory of the novel as a whole, which ends with Dinah being reabsorbed into the domestic sphere, leaving Lousteau, letters and Paris, and returning to her husband: ‘Elle fut charmante, dit-on, pour le comte. Ainsi, la Muse de Sancerre revenait tout bonnement à la Famille et au Mariage’.<sup>43</sup> The use of the word ‘charmante’, recalling the narrator’s comment at the start of the novel, suggests that order has been restored: women are in their proper place and all is right with the world. Tellingly, we hear nothing from Dinah at this point — so complete is her withdrawal from the public sphere, the reader loses contact with her. She is now the object of other people’s discourse, the *on dits* that circulate in Sancerre, not a speaking and writing subject. In placing women’s intellectual aspirations in opposition to marriage and family, *La Muse* seems to be following the standard line in misogynist nineteenth-century figurations of the *femme auteur*, according to which the female writer transgresses when she crosses from the private sphere to the public sphere, and thus, as Christine Planté explains in her groundbreaking study of female authorship in the period, ‘remet en cause le

---

<sup>42</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 632.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 790.

traditionnel partage des tâches et la distribution des fonctions, symboliques et réelles, entre les sexes, et annonce des bouleversements immédiatement perçus comme une menace d'égalité et d'indifférenciation.<sup>44</sup>

If, however, there is a threat to separate spheres ideology in *La Muse* Dinah is not so much its source as its symptom. The source is a weakness in the paternal order. Dinah herself is fatherless, but the text draws attention to her defunct progenitor, who died when she was twelve, by going to the trouble of giving him a name and a filiation: he was Moïse Piédefer, son of Abraham Piédefer. The given names, so redolent of patriarchal authority, serve to make Dinah's lack of a father all the more conspicuous. Indeed, the death of Dinah's father has a decisive influence over her future because it leads her to convert from Protestantism to Catholicism, the religion of her mother. With her biological father deceased, it is the Abbé Duret, a different kind of father, who steps into the paternal role, arranging her marriage, and then, as her marriage becomes more and more unhappy, encouraging her to write poetry for therapeutic reasons. Initially, Dinah is happy for her authorship of the verses to remain a secret, but she subsequently decides to 'se livrer à la publicité'.<sup>45</sup> The novel suggests that there are two factors that precipitate this change in attitude. The first is the July Revolution: 'Quand, après la révolution de 1830, la gloire de George Sand rayonna sur le Berry, beaucoup de villes [...] furent assez disposées à honorer les moindres talents féminins'.<sup>46</sup> The second factor is the death of the Abbé Duret, who, the novel assures us, would have prevented Dinah courting publicity, interposing himself 'entre une faute à commettre et sa belle pénitente' (the theological language here is telling: Dinah's first sin, before she commits adultery, is to publicize herself as

---

<sup>44</sup> Christine Planté, *La Petite Sœur de Balzac: essai sur la femme auteur* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), p. 35.

<sup>45</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 663.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 662.



a writer).<sup>47</sup> The absence of paternal authority is the pre-condition of Dinah's transgression. This absence is implied in the text in other ways, too, notably through the multiple allusions to *Adolphe*, a book Dinah treats as her 'Bible': 'elle l'étudiait; car [...] elle ne voulait pas être Ellénore'.<sup>48</sup> In this she partially, and ironically, succeeds; in their final bitter quarrel, Lousteau reproaches her with simultaneously playing the roles of Ellénore and Adolphe, jealous of her lover but also regretful of what their relationship has cost her in terms of status. By linking Dinah to Adolphe, Balzac's novel doubly underscores the idea that there is a weakness in the paternal order, both because Constant's hero's actions are partly a response to his father's dereliction of parental duty, and because, while declaring its literary filiation so openly, it nonetheless derogates from its model so clearly.<sup>49</sup>

Dinah's identification with the eponymous male protagonist of *Adolphe* is also one of the ways in which irony is introduced into the ending of Balzac's novel. For although Dinah returns once more to the private sphere, she does so because her worldly ambitions have been thwarted as a result of her liaison with Lousteau. Irony also insinuates itself into the final paragraphs of the novel when the narrator reports that '[Dinah] fut charmante, dit-on, pour le comte', where the 'dit-on' makes room for doubt and undermines the apparently copper-bottomed certainty of 'La Muse de Sancerre revenait tout bonnement à la Famille et au Mariage'. Indeed, it is no surprise that the next clause opens with a contrastive conjunction, a wry 'mais', which calls into doubt this apparent restoration of order: 'mais, selon quelques médisants, elle était forcée d'y revenir'. The irony flows, of course, from the tawdry reality of the

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 664.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 775.

<sup>49</sup> On the uses of *Adolphe* in *La Muse* see Alison Fairlie, *Imagination and Language: Collected Essays on Constant, Baudelaire, Nerval and Flaubert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 80-95.

situation: over the course of the novel the venerable institutions of Family and Marriage are evacuated of meaning not only through Dinah's adultery but also through Polydore's cynicism. This irony prevents a sense of secure narrative closure. Moreover, the way in which Dinah is represented in the text contributes to the unsatisfactory nature of the ending. She is a character who elicits ambivalent feelings in the reader and the narrator. According to the latter, Dinah is 'une femme dont les supériorités apparentes étaient fausses, et dont les supériorités cachées étaient réelles' (transposed to the structural plane, this accounts for the oddly bifurcated role Dinah plays in the text, as both a figure of ridicule and a device for exposing the ridiculousness of others).<sup>50</sup> The text specifically identifies these hidden qualities as, on the one hand, a 'probité virile',<sup>51</sup> but on the other hand a capacity for mothering.<sup>52</sup> Once the scales have fallen from her eyes as far as Lousteau is concerned, Dinah's own mother asks her how she can continue to live with him and she exclaims: 'Je serai sa mère!'<sup>53</sup> Dinah assumes a metaphorical motherhood in a dual sense here, not just providing for Lousteau's needs, but also taking on the responsibility of keeping their relationship itself alive. The narrator glosses Dinah's explanation in the following terms: 'Cette parole dit assez que son amour devenait lourd à porter, et qu'il allait être un travail au lieu d'être un plaisir'.<sup>54</sup> The image of love transformed from experience of pleasure to heavy burden is suggestive of pregnancy, emphasizing Dinah's maternal vocation. In practical terms within the novel this translates into a literary labour, whereby she writes the articles to which Lousteau adds his name.

---

<sup>50</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 651. On Dinah's ambiguity see Annette Smith, 'À boire et à manger dans l'écuelle de Dinah: lecture de *La Muse du département*', *French Forum*, 15.3 (1990), 301-314 and Baudry, 'Le Romancier et le bas-bleu'.

<sup>51</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 753.

<sup>52</sup> On the idea of maternity in the text see Smith, who argues that Dinah embodies a matriarchal regime of the gift in opposition to the patriarchal regime of capitalism.

<sup>53</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 774.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 774.

In emphasizing Dinah's status as a mother, both biological and symbolic, the novel derogates from the contemporary discourse surrounding the *bas-bleu*, which often presents women with intellectual or artistic ambitions as neglectful of maternal duties.<sup>55</sup> Consider Frédéric Soulié's disparaging *Physiologie du bas-bleu*, published the same year as *La Muse*. Soulié piles up anecdotes denouncing the ridiculousness of blue-stockings, including women, like Dinah, who claim to be connoisseurs:

le *bas-bleu* artistique attaché à la spécialité des vieux bijoux, des vieux meubles, des vieilles tentures, de toutes les vieilleries qui coûtent beaucoup d'argent [...] c'est à eux qu'on doit ces horribles petites collections de bric-à-brac qu'on voit dans certains boudoirs de la Chaussée-d'Antin. Ils y font passer la fortune présente de leur mari et la dot future de leurs enfants.<sup>56</sup>

The female connoisseur is here presented as sacrificing her family to her passion for antiques. Ultimately, since she is squandering her daughters' dowry, and thus imperiling their marriages and the perpetuation of the bloodline, she is associated with sterility. Moreover, the adjective 'vieux' is so insistently repeated through these lines that it seems to migrate from the furniture to the *bas-bleu* herself, suggesting the image of female collector as hag. At first blush, Balzac's novel seems both to draw on and contribute to this discourse. But in fact the representation of Dinah does not quite fit in to this model. Dinah is not a neglectful mother and her literary work is presented in the text not as a derogation from but an extension of her maternal role. The problem in the novel seems not to be that women might abandon the realm of reproduction for that of production, but rather that when the creative process is thought of in terms of maternity not paternity, in terms of 'les déchirantes douleurs

---

<sup>55</sup> See Martine Reid, 'La Couleur d'un bas', in *La Littérature en bas-bleu*, pp. 21-33.

<sup>56</sup> Frédéric Soulié, *Physiologie du bas-bleu* (Paris: Aubert; Lavigne, 1841), p. 108.

d'enfantement' not 'l'extase de la conception', it loses its value, assimilated to domestic drudgery and child-rearing.

In the figures of Dinah and Lousteau, therefore, *La Muse* schematizes the idea of authorship as procreation, presenting us with both an ovist and a spermist model, both of which are ultimately associated with artistic failure. There is, however, a character who models the text's own operations, and tellingly it is a character entirely lacking literary pretensions: Polydore. Polydore spends most of the novel as a background figure, whose most salient characteristics are invalidity and impotence, but he emerges at the end as its master subject. It is he who manipulates the other characters into playing roles in a scenario of his own devising, and in this sense he is the author of the action. How does the text account for Polydore's success? It suggests that it is because he is more thoroughly adapted to the society in which he lives than the other characters. If Lousteau seems to be living off past glories, and Dinah a figure struggling against certain social limitations placed on women, Polydore is a July Monarchy man through and through.

The first mention of the July Monarchy occurs in the novel's opening paragraphs, which provide, in customary Balzacian fashion, a panoramic view of Sancerre in which topographical and economic details commingle. Having established the place in which the action unfolds, the text goes on to anchor itself in a specific historical moment:

À l'époque où cette histoire eut lieu, le pont de Cosne et celui de Saint-Thibault, deux ponts suspendus, étaient construits [...].

[N]est-ce pas assez vous dire que le chassé-croisé de 1830 avait eu lieu; car la maison d'Orléans a partout choyé les intérêts matériels,

mais à peu près comme ces maris qui font des cadeaux à leurs  
femmes avec l'argent de la dot.<sup>57</sup>

The July Monarchy is here described in doubly deprecatory terms. First, the 1830 Revolution is trivialized as a mere personnel reshuffle, which failed to effect any meaningful change. Second it is denigrated as fraudulent through the analogy with the underhand husband. Both of these motifs — the chassé-croisé and the underhand husband — generate an image of the Orléans dynasty as the winner of a zero-sum game. Far from representing a creative, originary moment, the July Revolution has opened on to a space of stasis, where extant elements are reconfigured. This idea resonates throughout the text, which offers in the figure of Polydore the embodiment of the July Monarchy. For like the Orléans dynasty, Polydore owes his station in life to a chassé-croisé, the one whereby the Milauds became the de La Baudrayes and vice versa. But more importantly he behaves in the same way as the putative husband to which the Orléans dynasty is compared. Like that husband, Polydore makes a show of generosity towards his wife, agreeing to provide her with a pension while she is living in Paris with her lover, but also like that husband drawing the cheques on his wife's own funds. What he gives with one hand, he takes away with the other, in another example of the chassé-croisé as structuring figure. This is typical of Polydore's behaviour, for he consistently operates through strategies of appropriation and misappropriation — of Dinah's money, of Lousteau's children. He understands that, as Lousteau himself had explained to Lucien de Rubempré in *Illusions perdues*, 'travailler n'est pas le secret de la fortune [...]; il s'agit d'exploiter le travail d'autrui'.<sup>58</sup> Lousteau had been talking specifically about newspaper proprietors, but in

---

<sup>57</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 630.

<sup>58</sup> Balzac, *Illusions perdues*, in *La Comédie humaine*, ed. Pierre-Georges Castex, V (1977), pp. 123-732 (p. 346).

*La Muse* his words seem to take on a more generalized application as a formula for success in the July Monarchy.

In implementing strategies of (mis)appropriation, Polydore functions not only as an incarnation of the July Monarchy, but also as a figure for the author of *La Muse* itself. For this is a novel that presents itself as a work not of *creatio* but of *inventio*, a distinction explored by George Steiner in *Grammars of Creation*. The latter consists in combining and recombining extant elements; the former in bringing into being that which did not previously exist. It is, according to Steiner, ‘to creation that literature, and poetry, above all, lay insistent claim’.<sup>59</sup> As we have seen, this idea of poetic creation is present in *La Muse* only in a negative form, through Lousteau’s impersonation of a Romantic poet; overall the world of the novel is one which belongs to the regime of *inventio*. For in writing the novel, Balzac reappropriated numerous bits and pieces of text already published elsewhere. Thus a section of ‘la femme de province’ that he had contributed to *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* forms the substance of a speech that Dinah addresses to Lousteau. A number of *contes bruns* produced for an anthology in 1832 co-authored with Philarète Chasles and Charles Rabou also find their way into the book, furnishing the material for an account of an evening spent at Dinah’s salon during Lousteau and Bianchon’s visit, during which the guests entertain each other by telling stories. Another moment in *La Muse* sees Lousteau receive a package of proofs from Paris, wrapped in some non-consecutive pages of a Gothic novel, *Olympia ou la vengeance romaine*, which he, Dinah and Bianchon delight in trying to reconstruct from the fragments available. This episode repurposes a short parodic text Balzac had first published in 1833 in Sophie Gay’s periodical work, *Causeries du monde*. Strikingly, the novel makes no

---

<sup>59</sup> George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 127.

attempt to conceal the fact that it has been stitched together in this way. On the contrary, it is made clear to the reader that it incorporates elements from different sources. One chapter, part of the story-telling episode referred to above, is entitled ‘Observation qui évite au lecteur une réimpression’. It opens with Bianchon preparing to tell a lurid story of a Spanish grandee’s revenge on his adulterous wife (designed, as we shall see, to establish whether Dinah is having an affair):

Dans les histoires dont se composait son fonds de narration, car tous les gens d’esprit ont une certaine quantité d’anecdotes [...], l’illustre docteur choisit celle connue sous le nom de la Grande Bretèche et devenue si célèbre qu’on en a fait au Gymnase-Dramatique un vaudeville intitulé *Valentine*. (Voir *Autre Étude de femme*.)

Bianchon’s narration here instantiates *en abyme* Balzac’s own approach to writing *La Muse*. Like the illustrious doctor, the author too was in possession of ‘une certaine quantité d’anecdotes’ on which he could draw to put together the novel he was contractually obliged to write. Indeed, the text draws attention to Balzac’s multiple uses of this particular story, first used in 1831 in the *Contes bruns*, where it appeared under the title ‘Le Grand d’Espagne’, then under the title ‘Histoire d’un bras’ in 1837 as part of *La Grande Bretèche ou les trois vengeances*. The reference to *Autre Étude de femme* was added in the *Furue corrigé*, directing the reader’s attention to yet another use of the story within Balzac’s corpus.<sup>60</sup>

*La Muse*, therefore, invites us to think about literary production not in terms of procreation but as a form of *bricolage*. It also explores the consequences of that shift, namely a loss of narrative authority within the text. These consequences become

---

<sup>60</sup> On the function of the story in *La Muse* see Diana Knight, ‘Conjugal Secrets in Balzac’s *La Muse du département*’, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 40 (2012), 273-86.

apparent when the two scenes of narrative production in the novel, the *Olympia* chapter and the story-telling episode, are compared. In the story-telling episode, Bianchon and Lousteau, puzzled as to whether Dinah has yet taken a lover from among her admirers, devise a plan to trap her into involuntarily betraying the truth. They decide that one evening they will bring the conversation around to adultery, and through recounting stories on this subject they will be able to catch her conscience: ‘Racontons, après le dîner, quelques histoires de femmes surprises par leurs maris, et qui soient tuées, assassinées avec des circonstances terrifiantes. Nous verrons la mine que feront Mme de La Baudraye et M. de Clagny’.<sup>61</sup> Bianchon agrees that they will be able thus to catch the conscience of Dinah and her admirer: ‘il est difficile que l’un ou l’autre ne se trahisse pas par un geste ou par une réflexion’.<sup>62</sup> Lousteau and Bianchon’s plan relies on a certain understanding of the power of speech, famously expounded by Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedrus* and paraphrased by Jacques Rancière in the following terms: ‘la puissance de la parole vivante [est] la possibilité [...] de devenir [...] dans l’âme de celui auquel elle est adressée, une semence vivante, capable de fructifier par elle même’.<sup>63</sup> Under the regime of speech, to which this episode belongs, stories are orally transmitted, addressed to a specific person for a specific purpose, and intended to elicit the truth through acting on the body of the addressee. Language here is tied to the flesh, the flesh of the speaker from whom it emanates and the listener on whom it acts. But in *La Muse* this model turns out to be useless; the plan fails quite simply because Dinah’s response is inconclusive, and serves neither to inculcate nor exculpate her.

---

<sup>61</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 677.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 677.

<sup>63</sup> Jacques Rancière, *La Parole muette: essai sur les contradictions de la littérature* (Paris: Hachette, 1998), p. 81.



Contrast this with the *Olympia* episode, in which Dinah, Bianchon and Lousteau display their wit and sophistication in an act of literary improvisation, effortlessly manipulating the tropes and topoi of popular fiction to produce their own gothic masterpiece. This scene belongs to the regime not of speech but of the written word, characterized by promiscuity: ‘N’étant pas guidée par un père qui la porte, selon un protocole légitime, vers le lieu où elle peut fructifier, la parole écrite s’en va rouler au hasard.’<sup>64</sup> The metaphors of paternity and legitimacy that Rancière borrows from Plato resonate with particular force in *La Muse* because of the thematics of the novel. Certainly the vagabond written word opens up creative possibilities in the text — the *Olympia* episode is the only scene of genuinely spontaneous creative activity in the novel. Moreover, the scene helps further the plot of Balzac’s novel by bringing Lousteau and Dinah closer together, thus making their adultery more likely. In *La Muse*, speech, conceptualized as operating according to a legitimate protocol, is inefficacious; it is the bastard written word that acts in the world. At one point in the novel, M. de Clagny remarks to Lousteau that ‘toute votre infâme littérature repose sur l’adultère’.<sup>65</sup> Clearly there is a certain irony in M. de Clagny reprimanding Lousteau in these terms, when his irritation with the *feuilletoniste* is a function of sexual rivalry. And doubtless Lousteau is right to point out that if all books depicting adulterous relationships were banned there would be hardly enough left to furnish a room. But M. de Clagny is not wrong either - or at least, his comment is perfectly just in relation to the book in which he himself appears. *La Muse du département* is not simply a book about adultery, in the same vein as, to borrow two of Lousteau’s examples, the *Iliad* and *Paradise Lost*; illegitimacy is the very matrix of the novel.

---

<sup>64</sup> Rancière, p. 81.

<sup>65</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 680.

The *Olympia* episode therefore demonstrates the creative possibilities of the fatherless word, but this is a demonstration lost on most of the other guests present at the scene:

[‘] Comprenez-vous quelque chose?’ demanda timidement Mme Gorju, la femme du maire, à Mme de Clagny.

La femme du procureur du Roi [...] fit une moue à sa voisine qui voulait dire: On nous regarde! sourions comme si nous comprenions.<sup>66</sup>

The same inquiry is repeated on the next page:

[‘] Comprenez-vous quelque chose à tout cela? demanda Mme Piédefer à la présidente.<sup>67</sup>

Here therefore, within the diegesis we find represented a creative process which delights those involved but is received by others present with blank incomprehension. At this point the reader is in on the joke and we can therefore revel in our own superiority to philistine provincials. Here Dinah and the reader are complicit, but elsewhere in the novel that complicity dissolves and we find ourselves laughing at Dinah much more than we laugh with her. Although the novel treats Dinah’s collections with respect, it is dismissive of her efforts as a collector; she is completely unaware of the value of her collection and prefers Lousteau’s fashionable bibelots to the authentic masterpieces she owns.<sup>68</sup> The implied author of the text presents himself as a connoisseur, and interpellates the reader as a connoisseur. And yet, the reader of *La Muse* is also likely to experience on occasion a sense of exclusion not unlike that of Mmes Gorju and Piédefer. When we learn that M. de Clagny, on a visit to Paris,

---

<sup>66</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 706.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 707.

<sup>68</sup> On the representation of Dinah as collector see Emma Bielecki, *The Collector in Nineteenth-Century French Literature: Representation, Identity, Knowledge* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 79-85.

had managed to acquire a number of autographs for Dinah's album, including 'les quatre vers que Victor Hugo met sur tous les albums',<sup>69</sup> the breezy familiarity with which Hugo is here mentioned establishes that Balzac is part of a charmed circle into which most readers will never penetrate. A similar effect is generated when Lousteau prefaces a story he tells at La Baudraye by saying: 'elle me fut, et avec quel charme! racontée par un de nos écrivains les plus célèbres, le plus grand musicien littéraire que nous ayons, Charles Nodier'.<sup>70</sup> Here Balzac tips his hat to Nodier, one literary celebrity to another, and again the reader is aware of their own exclusion from that closed world. Moreover, by locating the value of the story in Nodier's vocal performance, the text implies that as readers we can access only a degraded version. Thus the relationship between author, characters and readers shifts throughout the book.

The overall effect of this is that it becomes very difficult for the reader securely to exercise critical judgement. Are we supposed to admire Dinah or not? Is her poetry self-evidently ridiculous? When the excerpts from her poem are introduced, they are prefaced with the following comment:

Quelques gens d'esprit prétendirent à Nevers que Jan Diaz avait voulu se moquer de la jeune école qui produisait alors ces poésies excentriques, pleines de verve et d'images, où l'on obtint de grands effets en violant la muse sous prétexte de fantaisies allemandes, anglaises et romanes.<sup>71</sup>

This suggests that the extracts from the poem are meant to be ludicrous, so bad that they might be parodic. But readers as judicious as Bernard Guyon have considered

---

<sup>69</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 673.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 682.

<sup>71</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 658.

this far too harsh a judgement.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, the narrator's views are not necessarily unequivocal. Just as Dinah's poem is on the edge of parody and seriousness, so it is difficult to establish exactly the measure of irony in his claim that the poem is in part 'digne de Byron'.<sup>73</sup> In reading *La Muse* readers are likely to find themselves unsure as to how far their own critical judgement and that of the implied author are in harmony, and consequently unable to rely on their own judgement. At the level of representational content, the novel describes a failure of discrimination, of connoisseurship, but it also enacts this, blocking the reader's ability to form confident judgements. The sense of a communication from writer to reader, 'selon un protocole légitime', to use Rancière's terms, has vanished, replaced with uncertainty. We are simply unsure of how to respond to the text and what to make of the characters.

In 1830, as noted above, Balzac responded to the explosion of the literary market by noting that 'aujourd'hui, un homme qui ne fait pas un livre est un impuissant'. *La Muse* suggests that after 1830 even impotence is no barrier to authorship. The novel depicts a world in which generative creative activity has been replaced by processes of appropriation and reappropriation. It links this to the emergence of a new social and political regime in which the paternal order has been undermined. This new regime is the matrix for the novel itself, which emphasizes its own jerry-built quality, making no attempt to efface the marks of discontinuity left by its process of construction. The novel is clearly a product of the regime it denounces. Moreover, although *La Muse* vilipends the newspaper business, it was first published serially, and in terms of its structure seems to model itself on the newspaper, which Richard Terdiman has described as 'the first culturally influential *anti-organicist* mode of modern discursive construction [...] build by addition of discrete,

---

<sup>72</sup> See Pasco, pp. 154-155.

<sup>73</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 660.

theoretically disconnected elements'.<sup>74</sup> The novel thus seems to be a kind of self-hating, and deeply pessimistic, *roman-feuilleton*, which cleaves to an idea of the author as father even as it laments the July Monarchy as the age of the impotent. But Polydore is not allowed to have everything his own way. It is his cousin, M. Milaud, from the legitimate branch of the family, who is given the last line, and the last laugh. This is surprising because he has appeared only once before in the novel, very near the beginning, when Polydore's apparently harebrained marriage was the main subject of gossip in Sancerre:

‘Cela s’explique, dit le président Boirouge, le petit homme aurait, m’a-t-on dit, été très choqué d’avoir entendu, sur le Mail, le beau M. Milaud [...] disant à M. de Clagny, en lui montrant les tourelles de La Baudraye: ‘Cela me reviendra!’<sup>75</sup>

This moment is recalled in the final line of the book, when Polydore once more encounters Milaud on the *Mail*:

‘Mon cousin, voici mes enfants!...  
-- Ah! voilà *nos* enfants», répéta le malicieux procureur general.<sup>76</sup>

This is the concluding line of the novel, and although it is clear that it is a joke, and a joke at Polydore's expense, it is not necessarily very clear exactly how the joke works. In laying claim to a share in the paternity of Polydore's children, Milaud seems to be implying that his comment at the beginning of the book stung Polydore into action. A well-directed barb thus provided the germ from which the novel fructified. In this sense, Milaud is the ideal metapoetic figure: it is his word that called

---

<sup>74</sup> Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 122.

<sup>75</sup> Balzac, *La Muse*, p. 636.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 791.

the story into being, and he is the true father figure in the text. At the end of the book its *deus absconditus* returns, the author-as-father reinstated once more. At the same time, however, the very fact that Milaud's joke is somewhat obscure — and the fact that the children are not his in any meaningful sense — once more leaves the reader uncertain. Have we understood? What *La Muse* withholds from us is what Henry James called 'that big Balzac authority'.<sup>77</sup> In his writings about authors and their rights Balzac often presents the writer's authority as akin to paternal authority. But, as so often, his literary works expose the faultlines in that position. Depicting a world in which paternal authority is dwindling, *La Muse* offers alternatives to thinking about literary creation in terms of procreation by offering two figures for the successful writer — Polydore, who paternal authority is guaranteed by the text of the Napoleonic Code, and M. Milaud, whose symbolic paternity is a function of his speech. In either case, *La Muse* suggests not that the pen is a metaphorical penis, but that the penis is a metaphorical pen.

---

<sup>77</sup> Henry James, *Autobiography*, ed. by Frederick W. Dupree (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 251.